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Effective correctional treatment

Research summary
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Question

How much treatment is required to reduce reoffending?

Background

Almost all incarcerated offenders are eventually released back into the community. The most effective treatment programs follow three basic principles: 1) treatment provided to offenders who are at higher risk to reoffend is more effective than treatment provided to lower risk offenders; 2) treatment programs that target those needs associated with criminal behaviour (i.e., criminogenic needs) such as antisocial attitudes, substance abuse, and associations with criminal peers, are more effective than treatment programs that target needs such as anxiety, self-esteem, or depression (i.e., non-criminogenic needs); and 3) treatment programs are more effective when they are delivered in a way that is responsive to the offender's style of learning, using cognitive-behavioural interventions that change attitudes and teach concrete skills. However, there is little evidence indicating how long these treatment programs need to be in order to have an impact. In other words, what 'dosage' of treatment is required for an offender in order to reduce his/her chances of reoffending?

Method

The recidivism rates of 620 offenders who received either no treatment, 100, 200, or 300 hours of treatment over the course of 5, 10 and 15 weeks, respectively, were examined. Offenders' risk to reoffend and criminogenic needs were assessed, and offenders were then assigned to different levels of treatment intensity (e.g., low risk/need offenders to 100 hours of treatment and high risk/need offenders to 300 hours). However, some offenders received less treatment than prescribed due primarily to not having enough time left in their sentence to complete the lengthier program. Treatment programs were cognitive-behavioural and targeted substance abuse, criminal attitudes, aggression, and criminal peer associations.

The participants for this study were offenders incarcerated in a provincial facility and followed up for one year after release. Statistical analyses examined the varying level of dosage on offenders of different levels of risk and need.

Answer

A follow-up of the offenders found that 31% of those who participated in treatment recidivated, significantly less than the 41% of the offenders who had no treatment. Results indicated that offenders with different risk/need levels required different amounts of treatment in order for it to have an effect.

For high risk offenders, with many criminogenic needs, 300 hours of treatment reduced recidivism from 59% to 38%. For these types of offenders, 100 hours of treatment was insufficient to reduce recidivism.

For medium risk offenders with few criminogenic needs, 100 hours of treatment was sufficient to reduce recidivism from 28% to 12%. For these types of offenders, more treatment was not associated with any further reductions in recidivism.

For high and medium risk offenders with a moderate number of criminogenic needs, 200 hours of treatment was sufficient to reduce recidivism from 44% to 30%.

Policy implications

- Providing treatment can be an effective way to enhance public safety.
- It is important to provide treatment programs of different length to accommodate the diversity of offenders rather than relying on the "one size fits all" approach.
- Offender assessment and the matching of offenders to an adequate "dosage" of treatment are critical. Attention must be made to assess both risk and need in order to match the appropriate amount of treatment that will impact on recidivism and be cost effective.

Source

- Bourgon, G. & Armstrong, B. (2005). Transferring the principles of effective treatment into a "Real World" prison setting. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 32*, 3-25.

For further information

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